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ABSTRACT

Since 1984, passing scores on the Preprofessional Skills Tests (PPST) have been required for entry into teacher education programs at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). College of education faculty, concerned because the majority of their population has traditionally been older, Hispanic students, developed a pre-PPST screening and advising program as part of the required Orientation to Education course. The core of the program consists of reading and math screening tests tied conceptually to the PPST and administered at voluntary testing sessions. The tests predict PPST scores with 96 percent accuracy. Students falling below a validated cut off score are referred to remedial or refresher work, including successful PPST-preparation workshops. PPST pass rates of UTEP students have consistently been at or above the overall state average, with minority enrollment in the college maintaining constant over time. These screening tests and variations of the UTEP program are used in over 70 institutions, and a Texas-wide Network on Teacher Competency Testing has been developed to share ideas about test-preparation and program improvement. (Author/JD)

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Responding to the Preprofessional Skills Tests

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By legislative mandate, after September, 1984, passing scores on the Pre-professional Skills Tests (PPST) were to be required for admission to teacher education programs in Texas universities. This requirement was part of a massive competency testing movement that will, by May, 1986, include routine testing of all public school students, pedagogy and teaching field testing of education majors seeking certification, and basic skills testing of all in-service teachers. Although the PPST mandate has been challenged by a suit against the Texas Education Agency, many Colleges of Education have adopted the position that students may take professional development and teaching methods courses prior to passing the PPST but that degree plans and actual program admission will remain "unofficial" until all three subtests have been passed.

The PPST was first administered in Texas in March, 1984. Trial administrations had suggested that the test would be difficult for many Texas college students, and initial test result substantiated that concern. In some institutions, as many as 50% of the students failed at least one part of the PPST the first time it was given; in some few schools, as many as 90% failed. While pass rates have improved somewhat, black and Hispanic students have consistently scored lower than whites.

Even before the first administration of the tests, faculty at University of Texas at El Paso, known locally as UTEP, were concerned about their students' chances of success on the PPST. El Paso is a rapidly growing but still poor urban area with the distinct characteristics and problems endemic to its location on the Texas-Mexico border. UTEP is a medium-sized institution with a 51% minority enrollment, composed to a large extent of older, part-time, first-generation college students. Additionally, many of the traditional-aged students have been educated up

to high school in Mexico and have learned English as their second language. A large percentage of students complete their first two years at the local community college and come to UTEP relatively unfamiliar with the university structure.

Convinced that the skills assessed by the PPST were valuable and that the tests themselves were appropriate for teacher education candidates, faculty in the College of Education began to develop a systematic program for advising students appropriately prior to their taking the PPST for the first time. The program would consist of screening tests to assess students' readiness for the PPST, test preparation workshops and referrals to remedial services if necessary, and academic advising before admission to the college. The basic "UTEP model" has been refined and expanded, is used throughout Texas and in several other states, and has resulted in additional commercial tests tied conceptually to the PPST.

Rationale for the Screening Program

Prior to the PPST litigation, students were barred from admission to the College of Education and hence unable to enroll in upper division professional education and methods courses until they had passed all three subtests. The initial rationale for the screening program was to help many capable students gain admission to the College of Education with a minimal amount of program delay. Faculty anticipated that many students might encounter delay for these reasons:

1. Returning and minority students failing one or more parts of the PPST would need to seek refresher study before attempting the test a second time; the majority of students seeking admission to the College

were Hispanic and/or older, the two groups who had been found to have the most difficulty with the PPST.

2. Students often completed all lower division course work at UTEP or the community college before consulting an education advisor; failing part of the PPST would leave them ready for upper division, professional development and methods courses but unable to gain admission to the College. They might have no courses left to take while they prepared for a second try at the PPST.

3. Many older student present previous college work that more than satisfies the academic foundations requirements. They want to begin education courses, but if they fail part of the PPST, they too have no courses left to take.

It was reasoned that if students could assess their preparedness for the PPST prior to their taking the test for the first time, they could plan their last semesters of lower division work and include time for any necessary refresher or remedial study. It was further reasoned that screening would help students with severe skill deficiences determine whether or not to pursue an education degree at all.

The UTEP Program

The need for a formalized pre-education structure was evident, and a one-credit hour course, Orientation to Education, was designated as a prerequisite to program entry. Voluntary PPST-screening would be offered as part of the Orientation course so that students could assess their preparedness for the PPST and seek appropriate refresher or remedial work prior to taking the test. The injunction against the PPST admission

requirement has meant that students can now take upper division courses but must pass the PPST at some point before graduation. They are strongly cautioned of this reality in the Orientation class.

Drs. Richard Burns and Terry Salinger of the Department of Teacher Education worked from the Educational Testing Services specifications to develop the math and reading screening tests that would be the core of the UTEP program. The Pre-Basic Math Skills Test (Burns, 1983), like the PPST, stresses logical thinking, recognition of more than one way to solve problems, number sense, and estimation rather than computation as such. Students are required to process information concerning mathematical manipulation quickly and thoroughly in order to work their way through the screening instrument successfully. The test contains 42 multiple-choice items and, like the PPST, requires considerable reading.

The reading portion of the screening battery, the 40-item Pre-Basic Reading Skills (Salinger, 1983), contains long, intermediate, and short passages and stresses inferential and analytic comprehension skills. The subject matter of the in-house test is diverse, has been termed "up-beat," and is of eighth grade and higher reading levels.

The "Written English Expression Placement Test" (ETS, 1963) has been used as part of the screening battery, but no essay has been required. A writing test has subsequently been developed (Salinger, 1986).

The screening battery is administered each semester in sessions which simulate an actual PPST-administration. Students do, however, receive results immediately through on-site scoring.

Advising

The second phase of the program has been to stress the predictive nature of the screening tests and to advise students whether or not they should take the PPST at its next administration. Students are told that scores fall into three "bands" and that if their scores are in the top band, they should consider taking the PPST immediately. Students whose scores fall in the middle band are advised that "some study or assistance would be helpful" prior to their taking the PPST. They are reassured that it is possible to improve skills enough to pass the PPST and that time spent seeking such help is worthwhile. Students with scores in the bottom band are advised that they "probably will need extensive assistance" in preparing for the test and that they should not take the PPST at its next administration. Further counseling about alternative careers has not been provided at UTEP, although some other Texas schools have developed this component of the screening program.

At no time have students been told that doing well on the screening test would guarantee their passing the PPST; neither have students who did not do well on the screening test been told that they could not register for the next administration of the national test. However, given the registration fee for the PPST, students could readily appreciate the wisdom of assessing their level of preparation and perhaps waiting out one PPST-administration cycle while they improved their skills.

The tests appear to be excellent predictors of success on the PPST. An internal validations study of UTEP students who took both the reading and math screening tests and the PPST indicated that the screening tests predicted passing the PPST with approximately 95% accuracy. Additionally,

with a slightly adjusted cut-off score, the reading screening test predicted a passing score on the PPST writing section with 92% accuracy. Ongoing studies continue to show high correlations between scores on the screening tests and on the PPST (Heger, 1985).

Refresher and Remedial Opportunities

Part of the advising process has been to recommend sources of refresher or remedial work. Because of a University of Texas system-wide prohibition against credit-offering remedial courses, no actual PPST-preparation course could be developed. Students are referred to basic skills courses offered through the UTEP Division of Continuing Education and the local community college.

They are also directed toward PPST-preparation workshops developed by the UTEP Study Skills and Tutorial Center. These workshops, offered for the six weeks prior to each PPST administration, have been the most popular option, partially because they are free and partially because of the excellent reputation of the Center, which is headed by Dr. Nancy Wood. The workshops balance skill preparation with strategies to develop "test wiseness" and reduce anxiety. Material used in the workshops have been taken from GED-, SAT-, and GRE-preparation books and have been developed by Salinger, Heger, and Burns (1986).

Although more than 250 students have participated in the workshops, many have delayed taking the PPST, probably because of the injunction against requiring the test for program entry. A study completed in December, 1985, indicated that 34% of the workshop participants had taken the PPST. Of these, 26% had passed all three subtests, and 19% had passed

two sections. Results of the study were significant and suggested success because:

1. The majority of these individual had been in the middle band of the screening test and might have had difficulty passing the PPST without help.
2. Passing scores of the majority of the samples were at most only three points above the cut score, another indication that these students might not have passed the PPST without the workshops.
3. Likewise, those who failed only one subtet did so by at most three points, well within the range of scores examinees can usually bring up to passing on a retest. These students could concentrate on only one area, and many seemed to be re-enrolling in the workshops for the one require skill.
4. Those who failed two or more subtests did so by an average of 8 points. These people had scored in the "bottom band" on the screening test and probably needed extensive, long-term remediation for skills deficits.

Additional data collection should further validate the workshops and refine both materials choice and delivery system.

Program Impact

Pass rates of UTEP students have consistently been at or above the state average on all administrations of the PPST. This represents a significant accomplishment because of the high minority enrollment at UTEP and the approximately 35% pass rate averaged statewide by Hispanic students

(TEA, 1985). Enrollment in the College of Education -- Hispanic and white -- has declined less than at many other institutions hard hit by initial and continued PPST pass rates. There is also indication that the minority students who are currently electing education as their major are in fact of higher academic ability than in years prior to the PPST (Heger, 1985).

Use of the screening program has spread beyond UTEP as well. El Paso Community College has begun to offer a section of the Orientation to Education course on its campuses and to make the screening tests available to students there. The transition to UTEP has thus been made smoother and more efficient because students can assess their preparedness early enough to seek remedial work while still enrolled in the community college.

The screening tests and variations of the entire UTEP screening program are in place in more than 75 junior and senior colleges in Texas. Institutions such as Prairie View A & M have made the tests a central part of their Title III advising program and have also used them for diagnostic purposes. Public and private colleges in other states that have adopted the PPST are also using the screening tests, as are several institutions where the tests are used for basic skills testing unrelated to the PPST. A second form of the reading and math tests are available commercially, along with a writing test constructed from the ETS specifications for the objective portion of the PPST writing test (Salinger & Burns, 1986).

The UTEP screeing program has also been a catalyst for educators from across Texas to form the Network on Teacher Competency Testing. Network membership includes community and senior college faculty, study skills center directors, certification officers, and Texas Education Agency per-

sonnel. By sharing successful approaches to PPST-preparation and student advising, members have been able to refine their own programs and contribute to a growing body of data about teacher education candidates in the state. Materials developed at member institutions have included software tied to the reading test (Johnson, 1985) and study guides for all three subtests. Network meetings are held twice a year, and a newsletter is published at UTEP. As use of the PPST spreads to more states, it is hoped that the Network will spread as well to include educators in other states who view competency testing as a positive force in teacher training.

Next Steps

Increased professional standards that exclude potentially strong individuals from the teacher force defeat the purpose of competency testing. The logical outgrowth of the competency testing movement in Texas must therefore be recruitment of minority and nonminority, traditional- and nontraditional-aged students. An inherent component of recruitment must be screening and remediation for potential teacher education majors whom high school work has left poorly prepared for academic study or whose skills have grown "rusty" with time. Teacher education candidates who can be brought to the point where they can pass a competency test -- especially one as sophisticated as the PPST -- can become valuable members of the teaching profession. Time spent developing higher level language processing, reasoning, and logical skills of individuals recruited for teacher eduction programs will strengthen their own academic skills and empower them as they join the teaching profession.

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